



The Route of an Indo-French Feminist Geographer

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The route of an Indo-French feminist geographer Kamala Marius-Gnanou

One is not born a colored woman, one becomes one

A route that is typically "Indian"?

My progression, my options and my scientific motivations can be justified by my encounters and above all by the fact that I grasped the various opportunities of research work offered to me. Yes, if it is necessary to recount the route of my Research that took me from a village in the region of Pondicherry (my Phd thesis) to the urban settlement system of India, via small industrial cities of North Tamil Nadu and the megapolis of Chennai, it is not necessary to establish a logical coherence in this unit. The logic took shape gradually as the research work advanced.

My itinerary stretches over a period of 25 years, beginning in 1984 with my first fieldwork for the diploma of DEA-MPhil (post-graduate diploma taken before completing a PhD), up to now. But the true story of my interrogations began much earlier, thanks to my family that travelled a lot right from my infancy. In my demonstration, I need to speak from within and at the same time have a detailed approach concerning my belonging to two cultures.

My permanent to and fro among my roots

It is important for me to explain who I am, as well as what is my position. This soul-searching is not pointless for it allows us to see with humility, gratitude, grief, the influence that our different environments have had on us, to feel the significance and the limit of our vision, to realize that circumstances can restrain and at the same time stimulate, to become aware, to a certain extent, of our viewpoints of things.

Today, my family space is a diasporic space: we are present all over the world, from Pondicherry to Dakar, via France and the U.S.A. By recollecting my grandparents' life story, I shall illustrate that I belong to an uncommonly widespread family. A unique fact,

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hardly known in the history of French Colonization, is that France had to resort to the colonized peoples to run Indo-China, as the Metropolitans refused to exile themselves in a far away land. The governors of Indo-China were able to recruit qualified people from the *Collège Colonial* of Pondicherry (presently called the French Lycée and still functioning) and from the *Ecole de Droit* (Law College) (1838): thus my great grandfather and my grandfather on the maternal side occupied the post of magistrate in the colonies... The decree of renouncement of September 1881, established an irreversible policy of assimilation. When "renouncing to their personal status", my ancestors had to give up their mother tongue, their Indian customs and traditions and take up a French patronymic name. Thus four thousand "*renonçants*" that is how they were called, became civil servants in the colonial administration alone; they were not eligible for any jobs in France.

This "acculturation process" was such that within the laps of a generation, no one was speaking Tamil anymore, especially those who never returned to the old colonial trading posts. Whereas those who went back regularly to Pondicherry, kept alive their customs and traditions, such as the arranged marriage within the same caste, which is one of the most symbolic practice. As far as I am concerned, my Tamil knowledge was enhanced belatedly due to my in-laws who spoke mainly in Tamil and even more due to my fieldwork where I tried with the help of an assistant to do my surveys in this language. On my mother's side, they spoke French at home since a long time.

When Dien Bien Phu fell in 1954, a great number of Pondicherrian employees had to leave Indo-China and go to either Pondicherry or France or else to the Reunion Island. Many of them became well "integrated" in France, all the more since a good number of them were "Gaullists" (for De Gaulle) during the Japanese occupation, unlike the "metropolitan" French who were rather for the government of Vichy. I have in mind my paternal grandfather who, as a police superintendent, was subject to the torture with water when the Japanese Forces occupied Indo-China. Later, in the framework of Defferre's law that was meant to prepare the French speaking African countries to get their independence, all the presiding judges of the African capital cities, from Fort-Lamy to Brazzaville and from Bangui to Dakar, and going through Abidjan and Cotonou, were Pondicherrian. My maternal grandfather was one of them. Finally the transfer treaty (*transfer de facto*) signed in 1956, gave its inhabitants of the trade posts born in the

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territory of the Establishments, the possibility to choose their nationality within a period of six months, beginning on August 16th, 1962 (*transfer de jure*). My father chose once for all the French nationality. Many a Pondicherrian ignoring these arrangements, presumed that they had retained their French nationality. When they realized their mistake, they were utterly destitute, all the more because all the Pondicherrians born outside the French trade posts, namely in Indo-China, retained their French nationality. These were not concerned by the famous 4th article of the transfer treaty which specified that "the French nationals born in the territories of the Establishments and who are residing there when the transfer treaty comes into force will become nationals and citizens of the Indian Union". This was the case of my mother who was born in Hanoi (VietNam).

Certain members of my family did not want to choose the French nationality. One of them is my great-uncle who had fought for the Independence of India (a freedom fighter) and was greatly attached to the new-born Indian Republic. The opportunities to migrate to the U.S., in the 1970s, concerned my uncles, aunts and cousins whose parents had chosen to be Indian. A good number of them work today as computer engineers or chartered accountants in the United States. The social networks (family forums, facebook ...) have reinforced the family and territorial ties that had never been broken. This is mainly due to my parents who, right since my birth, decided to spend one summer every alternate year in Pondicherry.

Belonging to this "Pondicherrian diaspora", my identity is highly significant for me who live in France but go often on a visit to India. Similar to so many others like me who live in a double culture, I was most probably tempted to overestimate "the Indian values", on the pretext of making a choice", on the pretext of making a choice. Is it not also the fact that systematically I assigned myself an Indian identity that urged me to go back constantly to my roots? Did I not also say to myself, so many times, that I spoke French very well (without any accent), and that I was very happy living in France and that I would one day go back to India, "my beautiful country"? All this brings me back to my "identity", in other words to "a perception of who you are and a self-awareness"ⁱ.

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Actually, when I express myself thus, I am in a peculiar situation: I grew up and lived in various places. I am an Indian woman "belonging to a caste", even though this is merely symbolic; till I was 18, I grew up mostly in French speaking African countries (Tchad, Gabon, Senegal), but I went on regular visits to India. I have done my schooling in government educational institutions in the various new independent nations, particularly in Senegal, and later in the French Universities. As a result, a major aspect of my sensitivity and my political horizons are marked undeniably by western realities, but also by those of the Southern countries and especially India, even though I am settled in France 30 years ago.

Hence, in life I consider myself as a member of an infinite variety of groups. I have thus won an identity that is multiple or even hybrid: my double citizenship (French and Indian)ⁱⁱ, my places of residence, my gender, my political opinions, my profession, my political commitments, my musical tastes ... Consequently, I possess multiple identities.

In fact, the partitioning of the world in terms of civilization and religion (Huttingtonⁱⁱⁱ), namely after the 11th September, has reinforced this unique system of categorization. As Sen^{iv} puts it (34, 2007) "we find a remarkable use of the uncommon and original nature in the concept of simple classification which serves as the intellectual foundation to the famous argument about Huttington's *clash between civilizations* that opposes the western civilization to the Islamic civilization, to the Hindu civilization, and so on"... Never at any time, should religion or race or even the color of the skin, constitute the exclusive identity of an individual. The fact of insisting on the uniqueness of an identity that is imposed on us impoverishes us remarkably.

None of these groups can constitute on its own, my identity. Moreover, the fact of having a double citizenship does not mean that one identity should supplant all the others. On the contrary, this *overseas citizenship of India* (OCI) obtained in 2008, thanks to my father who was born in Pondicherry, has fortified me in my identity which is multiple, sketchy, hybrid, fluid and it reassures me and is indeed even a relief when one refers to my "Indian identity" which is regularly attributed to me, especially in France.

Kamala Marius-Gnanou, 2016, "The route of an indo-french feminist geographer", in Rekha Pande (ed), *Women's Studies Narratives- Travails and Triumphs*, The Women Press, Delhi, p. 182–193

This is the reason why I shall not go further than this point in considering the identity as a "practical observance" rather than a "rational practice" to quote R. Brubaker (2001). Experiencing daily the social aspect of this identity that befits my position, I lack the benefit of hindsight to analyze it scientifically, not to mention the fact that this rational aspect remains desperately ambiguous considering its varied or even contradictory theories.

Since I spent the first 17 years of my life travelling outside France, it is a child's play to say that my vocation was bound to be a geographer.

The vocation of a geographer-cum-feminist

I must confess that I always wanted to be an economist, specialized in development studies and gender studies, even though I loved learning geography in school when it moved on to the Third World, as it was often the case, especially in Dakar (Senegal) where I obtained my high school diploma (Baccalauréat), of the University of Bordeaux (France). Of course, when I came to France or more precisely to Strasbourg, to do a bachelor's degree in Economics, I knew more about the history and geography of Africa than those of France. In school, the essays were about comparisons of Senegal with the Ivory Coast, or the French decolonization compared to that of the British. In literature and philosophy, we devoured the entire Age of Enlightenment, Victor Hugo, but also the literary works of Senghor and Césaire. The long discussions I had in class and elsewhere with my Senegalese friends on topics such as "negritude", assimilation, identity, democracy, feminism, excision, are unforgettable.

My adolescence in Dakar was also highly marked by the daily presence of our neighbors who were geographers, economists, sociologists and agronomists working at the "Institut de Recherche pour le Développement" (Research Institute for development) with whom we attempted continuously to transform the world. And during the school vacation I had the good fortune to accompany regularly my father (who was working as a soil-scientist) when he went on assignments in the mangrove swamps in Casamance and in Sine Saloum (Senegal). This delightful period came to an end when I left for France to continue my undergraduate and graduate study in the

Kamala Marius-Gnanou, 2016, "The route of an indo-french feminist geographer", in Rekha Pande (ed), *Women's Studies Narratives- Travails and Triumphs*, The Women Press, Delhi, p. 182–193

town of Strasbourg, which, according to me is an inward-looking town. It is here that I became aware for the first time my "otherness", that I was disparate. Even though I had travelled a good deal all over the world since my childhood, I was feeling disoriented in Strasbourg. Nevertheless, I withstood the urge to return on the spot to Dakar and continue my studies there. Till the end of my high-school, whenever we left for Pondicherry for a three or six months stay, we stopped over in Paris only for a very short time. Hence the feeling that lasted for a while that I did not belong to this place.

There is no doubt that my father had a great influence on his daughters, always trying to advise them. When he realized that I had difficulties in studying for B.A. Economics, due to an overdose of mathematics, statistics, micro and macroeconomics, he earnestly advised me to go for a bachelor's degree in tropical geography that would take me back to the study of the Third World. Well, out of the 700 first year students in B.A. Economics who passed to the next year, I was the only one who had come from the literary branch.

After passing with difficulty (since mathematics pervaded in most of the subjects) my B.A. Economics, I passed directly to the B.A. Geography Course and thereby avoided all the classes on physical geography and Physics. I cannot forget my catastrophic grade in the very first class exam in economic geography; I could not understand the system of references in geography since I was deeply marked by the Keynesian economy that was in vogue in the 1980s. On the other hand, the statistics applied to geography suited me well. After the Economics, Geography was for me like a breath of fresh air, even if, excepting the quantitative geography, I had the impression that there lacked rigor, mostly due to the absence of explanation of the theoretical presuppositions. Actually I was ill-at-ease during the lectures when they stated results that seemed too blunt without a demonstration preceding it. Appreciated mostly as a subject at the junction of social sciences, which is undoubtedly a plus side, it lacked credibility compared to experimental subjects like Economics.

To define myself as a geographer is not a problem for me, even if I am not always able to make out whether a research topic is geographical or not. No doubt I do geography: I am a member of a Geography Department, my publications come out in journals dealing with geography, but I attend symposiums not merely on geography but also on

Kamala Marius-Gnanou, 2016, "The route of an indo-french feminist geographer", in Rekha Pande (ed), *Women's Studies Narratives- Travails and Triumphs*, The Women Press, Delhi, p. 182–193

Economics. But still, I don't think I am different from a socio-economist, a political analyst, and this even while seizing the research subjects through the prism of space, on which I most probably set my eyes in a specific manner. The French geographers, unlike the English speaking geographers (and this includes the Indians) have a tendency to consider that all the subjects that do not have a special dimension are not part of geography. But at the same time, the geographers do not have the monopoly of analyzing the society in its spatial dimensions, especially because all the geographers do not have the same conception of space: some of them defend an anthropological approach, while the experts in spatial analysis try to draw laws, even if today many of us resort to both the approaches.

I am thinking in particular of gender issues. They form the topic of my essay - *Postcolonial studies and feminist geography : an application to gender inequalities in India*- for obtaining my accreditation to supervise research and to become full Professor (Habilitation à Diriger des Recherches). French geographers took too much time to deal with this subject, under the pretext that it did not concern geography. On the other hand, our English speaking colleagues who did not hesitate to position themselves as feminist geographers, have been taking an active interest in this matter since the 1980s, thanks to the trans-disciplinary departments of gender studies that do not exist in France.

It is not easy in our French and non-French speaking academies to define oneself intellectually and politically as an international geographer-cum-feminist. In France, in the field of geography^v, we had to wait till the 1980s and the 1990s, for the development of a feminist geography that criticized the foundation of the traditional geography and developed a feministic speech about space. Masculinity prevailing in its principles, its methods, its speeches, its silences, the world appeared to the geographers under the form of maps, plans, reports, as a world to be conquered, dominated, and exploited and thereby excluded the subjective perception of space, and hence it disembodied all those who made their way through the space. There persisted at the root of the traditional geography, a Universalist notion of the human being, based on the dualism man/woman. All that is not human, white and heterosexual, in other words all that does not automatically go under the patriarchal power, is something else.

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Positioning myself as a geographer-cum-feminist, working on gender in south India which is a privileged territory for me, I plead for a new geographical commitment. On the theoretical plane, I am going to make a reference to postcolonial studies and especially the postcolonial feminist theories that are still not rallied sufficiently, and are even unknown to French geographers.

My feminist consciousness did not spring up from ideas born elsewhere; its roots are much closer. Since I spent the first 17 years of my life between Africa (Tchad, Gabon, Senegal) and India, within a very broad-minded family, and then married into a very "traditional" family, I think I have the right to throw back into question the "Indian culture" from the point of view of a feminist, and not be accused of having become "westernized", as certain postcolonial feminists would like to do. The reason why I questioned so belatedly the Indian culture from the view point of a feminist, is because I experienced then, as a married woman, the dynamic cultural life of a woman. It is just before becoming a feminist that I realized that the Indian marriage could happen to be an institution where a number of women are downtrodden and alienated. Of course, many Indian women live out the gender oppression and yet do not foster feminist ideas.

Nevertheless, I have never felt comfortable, neither with "the clash between genders" nor with the position of the American radical feminism that militated against sexual harassment in one's place of work; according to me, that comes to victimizing feminism and I have never adhered to it. I never mix up sexual harassment and seduction; in this matter I agree with Judith Butler (2002) when she states that she would not like to live in a world where there is no seduction. "Seduction implies strategies, maneuvers to crack up the person you desire and that is very nice". She goes even further when she quotes Foucault who considers that "sexuality cannot work without power; and power is a dimension that arouses sexuality^{vi}". Of course, I am most probably very lucky not to have been subject to sexual harassment either in my private or in my professional life. Still I have to fight daily against hurtful remarks passed by some male chauvinist colleagues. I shall never forget what happened when I first arrived in Montpellier University: one of my colleagues told me that they were recruiting also "exotic flowers".

Kamala Marius-Gnanou, 2016, "The route of an indo-french feminist geographer", in Rekha Pande (ed), *Women's Studies Narratives- Travails and Triumphs*, The Women Press, Delhi, p. 182–193

I carry on mostly my feminist consciousness within the context of my activities in the labor union, namely amidst the university departmental committees (board of directors and university management committee – National committee of Universities) wherein I always campaigned, among other topics, that the private life of male and female colleagues are not to be taken into account when applications for professional qualifications or promotions are submitted. Parity in the trade union rolls has been accepted, but there is still a long way to go before parity is attained at the level of Professors, Vice-Chancellors of Universities.

Trouble in choosing between the cultural environment and the thematic approach

I have remained, what is called, an "Indianist" most probably because it was easy for me (my family resides in India) but also due to a desire to become more acquainted with the land where my roots are even if I tend to enlarge my horizons to Asia: I stayed in Viet Nam after my doctorate and recently, I set up, with the help of my colleagues belonging to the group 'geopolis' (<http://e-geopolis.eu>), a collaboration with the geographers of the University of Dakha. Of course, the complexity of this continent is more or less equivalent to that of Europe, by its great diversity, its caste system, its recent emergence ... On the other hand it is certainly a great advantage to be one of the rare academics of Bordeaux having specialized on India or even simply on social sciences. When an expert is needed, and since there aren't many to choose from, they appeal to me on too many occasions. So much so that very often it is inevitable for me to refuse. Actually, in addition to my lectures on the geographical development which inevitably includes topics on India, my classes at the INALCO and in the Schools of Commerce (Poitiers-Tours), I am also requested to give lecture courses (since almost 10 years) at the Institute of Political Sciences (IEP) on topics related to India. Year after year, the number of students in the final year of M.A., choosing India as one of their numerous options is increasing; of course this makes me happy and at the same time, it amazes me. I shall not mention the numerous popularizing lectures given to Associations, about a film ... Thanks to the French Institute (www.ifpindia.org) that is based in Pondicherry, I managed to do all my research work right from my M.Phil

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diploma in 1984 until today. Prosaically speaking, I was able later on to entrust my children to the care of my parents living in Pondicherry, and do my fieldwork in Tamil Nadu, even if I had a hectic life both at work and at home. And later it happened that I was offered research work mainly in India, even if I did not really make great efforts to get them.

Yes right from my thesis that was oriented on the spatial, social and economic impact of the green revolution, I took an interest in, among other topics, the debt bondage in rural areas, the professional mobility in an industrial district, the microfinance and all that is at stake due to the gender and more recently the urban issues through the process of metropolitanization or even through urban settlement system and finally in the dynamics of small cities. In spite of all these thematics that I explored through various field works, I have the impression that I do not know that well this country. This is perhaps due to the fact that I have never stayed here for more than a period of six months!

Even if one can criticize me for having a very narrow view of the world, I feel that by staying in India, I am able to have a global approach of issues that are typical to the South. Well before blaming myself for my "indianism" and my feminism, I can assert that India has also enabled me to look differently at other places and societies in which I have lived. Another facility would have been to make use of the French language and work in the countries where I spent my childhood and my adolescence.

ⁱ R.Brubaker, « Au-delà de l'identité », *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 2001/4 no 139, p. 66-85

ⁱⁱ Thanks to the lobby of the American Hindu diaspora, the OCI (overseas citizenship of India) was created in 2006; it is a lifelong passport for the "Indian overseas citizens", of Indian origin on condition that he can prove his Indian ancestry (parents or grandparents born on the Indian soil). These rights are similar to those of the NRIs (Non Resident Indians), excepting the right to vote and to be eligible.

ⁱⁱⁱ Samuel Huntington, *Le Choc des Civilisations*, Éditions Odile Jacob, Paris, 2000

^{iv} A.Sen, *Identité et violence*, Editions Odile Jacob, Paris, 2007

^v See Rosemary Chapman's classification concerning feminist geography, feminine writing on space, *recherches feminists*, vol. 12, N°2, 1997, PP 13-26

^{vi} Quoted by F. Joignot in "Le Monde" in the issue of September 24th, 2011.